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**NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY**

**NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE**

**ISLAMIC UNREST IN EGYPT -  
A THREAT TO U.S. REGIONAL INTERESTS**

**CORE COURSE IV SHORT ESSAY**

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THE GEOSTRATIC CONTEXT  
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Egypt has held a unique position in world affairs during the past thirty years. Throughout several Arab-Israeli wars, the Camp David accords, the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty of 1979, and most recently supporting the Allied coalition during the Gulf War, Egypt has been the focus of U.S. efforts towards moderate Arab states in the Middle East. It has been the bedrock upon which U.S. influence of the Arab states in the region has been based, and vital to stability within this critical region.

A new crisis looms for President Hosni Mubarak - the threat of radical Islamists who threaten the legitimacy of his regime. This challenge can have potentially devastating effects on the Middle East as a whole, and certainly on U.S. objectives in this area. The United States cannot allow a potentially hostile radical fundamentalist regime to assume power in Egypt.

In this short essay I will review U.S. interests in the region, briefly discuss the current conditions in Egypt which are precipitating this crisis, and look at the precepts of the Islamic fundamentalists. I will then propose some policy recommendations that may diffuse the current crisis, strengthen the Mubarak regime, and support U.S. objectives in the region.

### U.S. SECURITY CONCERNS

The Middle East is a critically important region to the United States. By far, the greatest amount of U.S. foreign aid is provided to Israel and Egypt. Arguably, the greatest investment of diplomatic time and effort have been expended in the Arab-Israeli peace talks. Our latest war was fought in the region. What then, are our regional security interests? In a recent lecture by Dr. Bard O'Neill of the National War

College, the following objectives were proposed <sup>1</sup> :

- Maintaining the Free Flow of Oil at Reasonable Rates
- Ensuring Survival of the State of Israel
- Maintaining Regional Security
- Equitable Settlement of the Arab-Israeli Crisis

I will now expand upon these objectives and discuss their regional relevance.

-Maintaining the Free Flow of Oil at Reasonable Costs. The world's economies are tied to the uninterrupted availability of middle eastern oil at reasonable prices. The memories of the 1973 oil embargo are still embedded in this nation's mind. Economic health depends upon stable oil prices, especially in this period of recession and the transformation of former Warsaw Pact nations to market economies. The recent Gulf War was fought over the issue of oil and how it might effect U.S. jobs and the economy. A direct linkage between western economic health and aid provided by both governmental agencies and private corporations and foundations to the region exists.

-Ensuring the Survivability of the State of Israel. Since 1948 the U.S. has enjoyed a "special" relationship with Israel. Support during four Arab-Israeli wars, massive foreign aid, and extensive diplomatic initiatives to solve the Palestinian conflict and normalize relations with other Arab states, have been credible signs of our commitment to this cause. Deployment of Patriot missiles to Israel during the Gulf War was designed to protect the population while maintaining the fragile coalition required to defeat Saddam Hussein.

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<sup>1</sup>Dr. Bard E. O'Neill, "U.S. Security in the Middle East," National War College, Washington, D.C., 2 Feb. 1994.

-Maintaining Regional Stability. Only through a stable region can objectives one and two above be accomplished. The end of the Cold War has lessened tensions in the region. Palestine Liberation Organization and Israeli peace agreements are slowly progressing. Syria and Jordan appear conciliatory. Due to our actions during the Gulf War, the Gulf Cooperation Council States are closer to us than ever. Iraq and Iran have been contained as conventional military powers and their influence over other nations of the Persian Gulf have been diminished for now. Embargo and counterproliferation measures aimed at keeping these states at their current levels of military power are in place. Although fundamentalist Islamic movements are active in the region, only Iran has succumbed to one thus far. In this period of relative peace, stability is vital to allow the nations of the region to further their social, economic and political agendas without having to expend massive resources on military hardware.

-Equitable Settlement of the Arab-Israeli Crisis. The ongoing crisis continues to sap the political and economic strength of the region. Military expenditures divert resources which could be applied to solving social and economic problems which beset the area. A solution would also further regional stability, so important for continued growth and peace.

In addition, the traditional objective of furthering democratic and representative political systems is also important. As in other regions, the integration of these ideals into the political systems will help ease tensions and further the stability in the Middle East. Due to cultural and historic differences, there must be no attempt to force an "American" solution on the region however.

As our closest Arab ally, Egypt has a critical role to play in the accomplishment of these objectives. It's important geostrategic position, large moderate population,

close political alignment with the west, regionally powerful military, and progressive normalized diplomatic relations with Israel causes it to be critical to our strategic success in the region. Internal conditions in Egypt however, are causing worry for U.S. policy makers. We will next look at contemporary Egypt.

### CONTEMPORARY EGYPT

There is no denying that a broadly-based Islamic revival is now occurring in Egypt. Economic, political, and social affairs are in disarray. The legitimacy of the Mubarak regime is in serious question. These conditions potentially spell trouble for the United States.

Economic problems abound. Over 2.1 million Egyptians have left for employment in other Arab states because of the shortage of jobs in Egypt. This lack of good salaried jobs has drained the country of some of its best managerial, medical, and administrative talent. The foreign debt is now over \$29 billion. During the past three years as payment for its participation in the Gulf War, Egypt has received grants or debt forgiveness of over \$18 billion, in addition to long-term, low-cost loans from the west and several Arab neighbors. Egypt had a trade deficit of over \$7.5 billion in 1991, and its unemployment rate now stands at over 20% of the work force. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have modified their policies to assist in the economic recovery of Egypt. At least half of the 400,000 people entering the Egyptian work force this year will not find employment. Teachers, police officials, and government clerks work two or three jobs to keep their families fed. Egypt will be forced to import \$4 billion of food each year to ensure marginal subsistence levels.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Chris Hedges, "Can Economic Reform Still Rescue Egyptians?" New York Times 9 July 1993: A12.

"Discouraged by economic conditions that hold no promise of a better future, many Egyptians sense a loss of control over their lives."<sup>3</sup>

Political institutions are a shambles. Corruption runs rampant throughout the government bureaucracy. Shoddy building construction, land reform, and employment opportunities are all effected.<sup>4</sup> To keep its constituents in line, the National Democratic Party dispenses patronage through state-run enterprises. A state of emergency has been in place since the 1981 assassination of President Anwar el-Sadat. This has given the state extraordinary legal power over it's citizens. Mass detentions, collective punishment of whole communities suspected of harboring terrorists, curfews, house demolitions, and extra-judicial killings are all routine occurrences.<sup>5</sup> Military courts have replaced civil courts in cases of terrorism. "These military trials have weakened Egypt's civilian judiciary, encouraged human rights abuses, and stoked popular alienation from the government."<sup>6</sup> The election process is also under great scrutiny. "We have not had a fair election in Egypt since 1950, and this is dangerous, said Riffat Said, the Secretary of the National Progressive Unionist Party. It encourages most citizens to be passive, to ignore political life, leaving the role

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<sup>3</sup>Caryle Murphy, "Wide Egyptian Unease Abets Muslim Radicals," Washington Post 11 April 1993: A23.

<sup>4</sup>Dr.Ibrahim Abazah, "Death to Us and Long Live the Mafia," Al-Wafd, Cairo 10 Dec 1992: 6.

<sup>5</sup>Tom Porteous, "Egypt:Equating Islamists With Terrorists is Counter-Productive," Middle East International 9 July 1993: 16.

<sup>6</sup>Caryle Murphy, "Military Trials and Death Sentences Challenge Human Rights," Washington Post 31 October 1993: A25.

of the opposition to the extremists." <sup>7</sup>

Social institutions have seen significant changes also. Egypt's population continues to grow at an alarming rate. Every ten months the population increases by a million people. Due to harsh conditions in the rural areas, over one thousand new residents arrive in Cairo every day which places more strain on an already ineffective government.<sup>8</sup> The lack of available, affordable housing has reduced the married rate. Increased terrorism is having a significant effect on the tourist industry, which after foreign-aid is Egypt's largest source of revenue. Over 200 people have been killed and 620 injured as a result of this violence."<sup>9</sup> The government also controls the media.

"By bombarding the public with sensationalist news and commentaries about the terrorist activities of the extreme fringe of the Islamist movement, the government controlled TV, radio, and press seek to brand all those who contest the regime on the basis of an Islamist ideology as extremist...At the same time the media continue to ignore the real and very important issues which Islam is raising right through Egyptian society, corruption, the breakdown of traditional values, social alienation, and loss of cultural identity."<sup>10</sup>

### FUNDAMENTALISM

As we have seen, conditions in Egypt have fueled an Islamic revival. The general problems of the nation - economic disasters, overpopulation, uninspiring leadership, and violence, seem to be spurring a return to religion in all of its forms, not merely its radical political form.

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<sup>7</sup>Hedges A12.

<sup>8</sup>Mary Anne Weaver, "The Trial of the Sheikh," New Yorker 12 April 1993: 74.

<sup>9</sup>Chris Hedges, "Militants Plan to Increase Violence, Egyptians Say," New York Times 19 December 1993: A2.

<sup>10</sup>Porteous 16.



"It is evident in the streets: more women are wearing the head veil, including career women.

There are fewer places that serve alcohol outside the major hotels, and those that do are very discreet about it. At Friday prayer, mosque attendance spills over into the adjacent streets.

Television preachers are popular, and the radio station carrying the Quran is widely listened to.<sup>11</sup>

Many Egyptians see this return as a credible alternative to the status quo. Working from local mosques and in the streets, fundamentalists have found eager converts among the legions of idle men in Egypt's slums and rural villages.

"Since the 1952 revolution, all our leaders including Nasser, Sadat, and Mubarak, have taken us through so many twists and turns. Socialism failed us under Nasser, capitalism failed us under Sadat and Mubarak. Islam was the only constant and it remains.<sup>12</sup>

Currently, two major Islamic organizations are striving for national leadership in Egypt; the Muslim Brotherhood, and the Islamic Group. Although both strive for an Islamist state, their methods differ greatly.

The Muslim Brotherhood was founded in the late 1920's to protest England's colonial rule over Egypt following World War I. After the British departed in 1952, the Brotherhood continued to agitate for an Islamic government. In 1954 after an attempt on the life of Nasser, the Brotherhood was suppressed, its leaders executed, and the organization went underground.<sup>13</sup> Today the Brotherhood is not a very revolutionary organization. It has broad support among the middle class and is opposed to violence.

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<sup>11</sup>Michael Collins Dunn, "Fundamentalism in Egypt," Middle East Policy Vol II, No 3: 70.

<sup>12</sup>Weaver 81,82.

<sup>13</sup>Weaver 76.

While opposed to Western mores, it is vigorously capitalist.<sup>14</sup>

The Islamic Group contains over 40 organizations which formed an alliance in 1985. It started as a university student movement in the early 1970's, but has now spread to the lower working class in the slums and depressed rural areas of the upper Egypt. The Group has been blamed for widespread use of violence including bombings, shootings, and attacks on tourists.<sup>15</sup>

These fundamentalist organizations have constructed visible social and welfare programs rivaling those of the state. During the October 1992 earthquake in Cairo, "Islamists were on the street providing food and blankets, alternative housing and tents, while the government was nowhere to be seen." <sup>16</sup> On a daily basis they also provide health, educational, and social-welfare services that are far superior to government facilities. And always, they are preaching to show the true meaning of Islam.

"Most sympathizers swiftly express the conviction that once Egypt is ruled solely by Islamic Law or shaaria, it's economic problems will be solved, and Muslims will again attain the political and cultural dominance they had in earlier centuries. <sup>17</sup>

Many supporters feel that fundamentalism is a way to;

"eradicate the last and deepest legacy of colonialism: western cultural dominance. This view shared by many Muslims is now lent strength by daily reports of what is seen in the Muslim

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<sup>14</sup>Dunn 72.

<sup>15</sup>Murphy, Wide 25.

<sup>16</sup>Weaver 82.

<sup>17</sup> Murphy, Wide 25.

world as Western aggression against Islam in Bosnia, Iraq, Palestine, and Somalia." <sup>18</sup>

Funding for the movement is derived from several sources. Saudi Arabia, Iran, the Gulf states, and the Muslim Brotherhood's own financial base which includes Islamic investment firms, all contribute to the cause.

The Islamist movement gains strength each day as dissatisfaction spreads.

"When I asked a foreign diplomat, a few days before, how serious a threat the Islamist groups posed, he replied, They're not regime threatening - at least not yet. But if all the negative forces that drive this movement continue without modification for the next twelve to eighteen months, I'd probably be a little less certain of that. <sup>19</sup>

### POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

What then should U.S. policy be to mitigate this crisis. There are no easy or quick answers, but clearly time is running out. The dissidents claims are justified and must be corrected.

First, we must be frank with Mubarak. He must understand that we have a vital interest in the maintenance of his regime, but must also understand that his internal policies if not changed, will cause it to ultimately fail; and with it our fortunes. This process of reform must be incremental and spread across the entire spectrum of political, economic, social, and military spheres. Our efforts must appear low-key so as not to provide the Islamists with an additional source of propaganda. Our level of foreign aid must, in the short term remain constant, but be reprioritized to solve some of the most pressing problems. We must also be creative, and search for some non-

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<sup>18</sup> Porteous 17.

<sup>19</sup> Weaver 80.

traditional economic solutions. Diplomacy must be the statecraft tool of choice. Now for some specifics.

Significantly reduce the levels of military assistance provided to Egypt and use these funds to pay for higher priority programs. The relative peace in the Middle East and solid Israeli-Egyptian relations have reduced the need for the latest military hardware. Identify and provide only those critical items necessary to maintain Egypt's relative standing in the region.

Make economic development the highest priority. Obtain support through all available means: other western nations, financially independent Gulf states, United Nations, financial institutions, private corporations and charitable organizations. We must put together a global coalition of financial donors reminiscent of the coalition forged prior to the Gulf War. Trade must be expanded in the area. Entice industry to open factories and take advantage of Egypt's large markets and geostrategic position. Develop exchange programs with mid-level Egyptian entrepreneurs so they can learn western management techniques and methods. Improve the educational system to provide a more knowledgeable and productive worker.

The governmental bureaucracy at all levels must be reformed. Corruption must be significantly reduced. This will save funds for other needed projects and strengthen the legitimacy of the government with the people. Unqualified workers must be replaced with trained and motivated ones. The plight of the rural poor and slum dweller must be improved. Election reforms must begin. The regime must be one of inclusion - all parties must have their views aired. Moderate Islamists must be accepted into higher levels of government. Martial law should be ended, and trials returned to the civilian judiciary for action. Violence towards the dissidents must be

reduced, and human rights abuses eliminated.

The media must refocus to acknowledge the nations' problems, and then show government and private actions being taken to eliminate them. Opposing points of view must be heard. A dialogue must be developed between the governed and their leaders. This will require the inclusion of moderate Islamic voices which can drown out those of the more radical Islamic organizations.

The above recommendations will not be easy and they will require time and skill to implement. We must remain firm with the Mubarak regime and develop time lines, rewards and punishments for their accomplishment. Only after putting its own house in order can Egypt play a regional role commensurate with its potential. Our continued influence in this vital region is linked with the continued strength of a pro-western, moderate Mubarak regime. The United States must ensure its' policies support our objectives in this region.

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